

Varicella: an anecdote

John Carne, retired general practitioner

During most of my time as a general practitioner, I lived on a main street in a house which had been the home of my predecessor. Next to the front door was my nameplate, and this inevitably attracted passing schoolchildren to ring the front-door bell!

One morning as I was finishing my breakfast, prior to dashing up to the surgery at about 8.15am, the doorbell rang very insistently. I cursed the child who was having his irritating fun, but nevertheless opened the door to a young man I didn't recognise, who was clutching his abdomen and seemed in obvious pain. I could only invite him in to my study room, which sported a couch. At my invitation, he told me his story and confessed he was not a patient of the practice but had just arrived in Lancaster. As he lay on the couch and I examined him, my daughter, aged about four years, came into the room and looked at this young man and decided she would introduce herself by shaking hands. I shooed her out of the room and apologised for her appearance. The diagnosis seemed fairly straightforward; he had acute appendicitis. I ferried him to the hospital.

I raced through my day's duties, because the next day I was due to fly with my wife and mischievous daughter to Germany on a two-week holiday. That same evening, the young one threw a temperature of 104.4°F with no clue as to what was

wrong with her. I felt we would have to cancel the holiday, but next morning she awoke, bright as a button but covered with an obvious chickenpox rash. It was perhaps unfair on other flight passengers, but we decided to take her, the rash being made hardly noticeable by covering her face with a balaclava helmet. The journey was uneventful, although the air hostess several times peered at our child rather suspiciously, but she never questioned why she had her face almost concealed.

Our daughter was fully recovered by the time we returned home.

On my first day back at work, I thought to enquire about the appendicitis case I had delivered to hospital. Was my diagnosis right?

'Yes,' said staff nurse.

'Has he been discharged?' I asked.

'No,' came back the answer.

He had had his inflamed appendix removed, but two days ago he had presented with a chickenpox rash and been shipped off to isolation in Beaumont Hospital.

I never told him my daughter developed it the day they met!

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